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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DJIBOUTI 000626

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION SEEKS USG ASSISTANCE IN PROMOTING
DEMOCRACY IN DJIBOUTI

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MARGUERITA D. RAGSDALE.
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) Summary: A delegation of heads of Djibouti's opposition met, at their request, with Ambassador on June 8. They expressed to her their concerns about what they described as a lack of cooperation of the Guelleh government with the opposition and the high level of frustration existing among the majority of the country's population. The resulting atmosphere could lead to violence. They wanted direct USG intervention in Djibouti to effectuate rapid democratic change. Ambassador used the occasion to make clear the USG commitment to the advancement of democracy in the Middle East and Horn of Africa and also to advise opposition members of their own responsibilities, not just rights, within a democratic system. End summary.

12. (C) Ismail Guedi, President of the Union for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), Ahmed Youssouf, President of the Republican Alliance for Democracy (ARD), and Souleiman Farah, Acting President of the Movement for Democratic Renewal (MRD) praised the recent commitment by President Bush to promote democracy and good governance on the African continent. In a meeting with Ambassador, Pol/Econ officer, and Pol/Econ Assistant on June 8, the group, known as the Union for Democratic Alternates (UAD) coalition, said President Bush's words gave them hope and renewed their energy. They said their numerous appeals to the Government of Djibouti for transparent and free presidential elections had been in vain. The coalition wished to continue its fight for a democratic future for the country and warned that all their efforts to avoid violence could be useless in the face of "growing frustration" of the population at large. The coalition accused the government of ignoring the opposition and, sometimes, "threatening their members."

13. (C) The Ambassador pressed for specificity in the UAD claim of a genuine danger of violence or revolution in Djibouti. The UAD used the example of Somalia, saying people there had taken to the streets to oust the corrupt Siad Barre. As the population in Djibouti is being deceived similarly by "massive frauds," which happened during the recent presidential elections, the same could occur in Djibouti. They continued that since President Guelleh had not been elected democratically, the danger of violence exists and once started, would be difficult to stop. The world will blame the U.S. and France, Guedi said, for having failed to take action to prevent the violence.

14. (C) The UAD continued that in their view, the Government of Djibouti lacked a political will for electoral reform. Giving no specific examples, Youssouf declared that the Government of Djibouti does not take the opposition seriously and continuously misleads the international community. It uses force, fraud and public funds to stay in power. While pluralism was legalized in 2002, the result is still single party rule since the remaining parties have no real power. Eleven years of civil war, group members went on to say, which resulted in more than a thousand deaths on both sides, were caused by the Government's refusal to embrace democracy and good governance. Moreover, the government's unwillingness to change and its peace agreement with the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD) in 2001, signed in the presence of the international community, is still not implemented.

15. (C) The Ambassador told the representatives that both she and her interlocutors have expressed clearly to each other the importance of democracy and good governance. So how would they suggest a government proceed, she asked? She noted that the UAD is free to criticize government in a democracy but criticisms are best accompanied by constructive ways to solve perceived problems. That is part of the responsibility of an opposition movement in a democratic system. The UAD responded that it had put forward in October, 2004 nine government actions that were necessary for fair and transparent elections. They included revising and updating lists of registered voters, making public this list, free and fair access of opposition parties to the local media and allowing independent TV and radio stations. The Government of Djibouti ignored these propositions completely, they said, and by doing so ignored the will of the majority

of the population. Thus, only pressure from western nations will convince Djibouti's government to change.

16. (C) The Ambassador stated that the U.S. wishes to promote dialogue between the Government of Djibouti and opposition members but cannot impose a system of government. UAD members said strong U.S. pressure must be applied. France had, they said, helped Ivory Coast promote democracy. The U.S. did a remarkable job on Ethiopia creating democracy and good governance. The U.S. has also had great success in Iraq. Djibouti needs this kind of strong commitment from both the U.S. and the European Union (EU). The EU has already started putting pressure on Djibouti for an all-inclusive parliament, Guedi said. Guedi added that 45 percent of the population voted for the opposition in 2003 legislative elections but this number was not reflected in the make-up of Parliament. (Note: Djibouti subscribes to a winner take all system which leaves the winning party in control of all parliamentary seats regardless of volume of votes received by the opposition. End note.)

17. (C) The Ambassador told coalition members that the Government of Djibouti has expressed publicly the need for political reform and especially for change in the representative system for the National Assembly. Yet it had indicated that it wanted to effect change on a "step by step" basis. The Ambassador asked about the feasibility of such an approach and about opposition priorities for democratic reform. According to the UAD, an all-inclusive National Assembly is a top priority. However, there are other important issues such as revision of voter lists. Another important priority would be to organize local elections and create a structure at a lower level other than that of the National Assembly. The U.S., they said, needs to persuade the Government of Djibouti to create democratic institutions at the village, town, and district levels. This will give an opportunity for the opposition to develop at an early stage. The opposition said it also sees decentralization as a priority but the Government of Djibouti has continuously postponed decentralization since 2002.

18. (C) Ambassador inquired if the opposition had considered among its priorities satisfactory resolution of the divisive issue of tribalism in Djibouti, specifically apparent differences between Afars and Issas, which sometimes cloud the political landscape. The government viewed tribalism, according to Guedi, as only an excuse for non-action. Clan differences, he argued, could "easily" be overcome with local and regional elections. If every region and town had its own representatives, tribalism will disappear because power will be equally shared. Tribalism exists in many other countries in Africa, but it did not prevent the advent of democracy, they added. Grassroots democratic institutions are key. The Government of Djibouti does not want a solution to tribalism because it wishes to continue to divide people to more easily rule them, the group insisted.

19. (C) Ambassador then raised the issue of leadership among opposition parties. The death of Ahmed Dini, she said, has brought this issue to the forefront among those who support neither the current government nor the current opposition. These individuals question the capacity of opposition members to lead the population. Ambassador also noted a continuing criticism that the opposition is composed of leaders who themselves were in government before Ismail Guelleh but who brought about no real democratic progress to Djibouti. She sought the UAD's views on this perspective. With some timidity, the UAD responded that the opposition won more than 45 percent of the vote in 2003, so that must surely indicate a measure of confidence in leadership capacity. (Comment: We note that the late Ahmed Dini headed the opposition in 2003, at the time of legislative elections. End comment.) Guedi conceded that it is true many in the opposition held government positions previously. Yet he offered the view, lamely, that they did not succeed in bringing about change because "the single party system was the rule at that time in Africa generally, and Djibouti was young with fewer problems."

110. (C) The Ambassador spoke of her desire to encourage a dialogue between the Government of Djibouti and the opposition but also urged the opposition to consider the tone of its frequently harsh and highly personal messages to government officials. Confidence building measures were necessary to create an atmosphere that might permit a dialogue. The UAD agreed but insisted the U.S. needed to put considerable pressure, at the same time, on Djibouti's government. They repeated that their "nine conditions" had to be met and that the peace agreement the government signed with the FRUD had to be honored. The UAD described the government as "not ready for a dialogue" but that the opposition was sincere in its willingness to contribute to democracy.

111. (C) Comment: Djibouti's Minister of Interior, subsequent to this meeting, sent an official letter to all opposition party heads requesting a dialogue. Predictably, the opposition is dragging its feet on participating. The

government views the foot-dragging as clear evidence of the bankrupt nature of the opposition -- devoid of leadership, devoid of ideas, and devoid of a constituency. The opposition, on the other hand, says it has in the past declined to participate in government-sponsored attempts at dialogue because of the "insincerity" of the government in the activity. This is a weak argument that begs the issue. The opposition in Djibouti has been badly diminished by the death late last year, due to natural causes, of the charismatic Ahmed Dini. Yet fault also can be found in other areas. There is a striking unwillingness of the old guard of opposition members, such as the three who met here with Ambassador, to share leadership with younger Djiboutians. There is also a paucity of not just forward-leaning ideas among them, but genuine ways to effectuate change. In addition, personal animosity within the opposition for ruling party officials does not help. The idea of regional elections was first broached by the government of Djibouti, not by the opposition. In Embassy's democratization efforts, currently focused on dialogue and institution building, we are seeking ways to develop a more mature opposition that can be a constructive counterbalance to the current ruling party, but also a future political well source for government leadership, regardless of party, clan or tribal affiliation. End comment.

RAGSDALE